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Improving Student Learning – Through the Curriculum

The 16th Improving Student Learning Symposium, University of Durham, UK, 1–3 September 2008.

Assessment for learning: a critical review of a contested territory

Liz McDowell, Kay Sambell and Gillian Davison

University of Northumbria

Research seminar

Themes: research-based curriculum, assessment as learning, the student experience and learning

Tuesday 2 September 2008, 10.10-11.10 in Bayley

The aim of this research seminar is to engage in a critical exploration of Assessment for Learning (AfL), situated within the higher education research literature. This is timely because AfL is generating significant interest as a way to improve student learning.

Concepts and definitions vary, however: Black (2006, p.11) suggests that AfL has become “a free brand name to attach to any practice”. Other closely-related terms are in use. Formative assessment is the longest-established (Scriven, 1967) and there is a widespread assumption that AfL is synonymous with formative assessment (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). ‘Assessment as learning’ is perhaps less common, but is also sometimes used as a term for formative assessment. In other cases, AfL is associated particularly with the use of self-assessment (Winter, 2003) and with learning by student involvement in formative or summative assessment tasks (Rust, 2003). Learning-oriented assessment (Carless, 2006) also sees both summative and formative tasks as ‘vehicles for learning’. Thus, learning-oriented assessment, along with some versions of AfL, (McDowell & Sambell, 2005) go beyond formative assessment to encompass the promotion of learning within the whole assessment environment.

James (2006) has identified differences in AfL practices operating within different educational paradigms : behaviourist, cognitive-constructivist and socio-cultural. Relatedly, there is a range of justifications on offer for AfL practices. One is to counteract the current situation where summative assessment pervades the student learning experience, leaving formative assessment ‘under constant threat’ (Knight & Yorke, p. 43). The use of AfL, and feedback in particular, is promoted as the way of enhancing student achievement (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). AfL is also used within the discourses of quality assurance systems (e.g. QAA, 2006) with particular reference to feedback, transparency and explicitness. Additionally, the notion of ‘constructive alignment’ (Biggs, 2003) is seen as a way of directing student effort to ensure congruence with specified learning outcomes. AfL practice is also associated with concepts of student-centeredness and individualised learning

(Ecclestone, 2002). In its inclusion in the National Student Survey (<http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>) in the form of feedback and support, it has become closely linked with ideas of student 'entitlement' and the student as 'customer'.

It is hard to argue against AfL. The term enjoys something of a 'halo effect'. Some authors do question whether AfL is always 'good thing' (Pryor & Crossouard, 2007). Ecclestone (1999, p.49) suggests that AfL can be a more insidious way than conventional testing of 'seducing learners into self-disciplined conformity'. Is AfL giving the appearance of progressive change for learners whilst not challenging fundamental political and structural features of assessment regimes at institutional, national and even international levels? (Broadfoot, 2007)

In the seminar we aim to discuss:

- The ways in which competing definitions and terminology associated with AfL might impact on or impede research and practice
- In what ways AfL curricular developments might be seen to empower or coerce students
- The extent to which AfL practices developed at curriculum level might serve to divert attention away from more radical questions about AfL regimes on more structural levels